

HOW TO...

Simulate steam and smoke

Adam Banks gets steamy with the photo-manipulation tools in Photoshop Elements



Food is notoriously tricky to photograph. If you think a lot of work goes into making supermodels look good, you should see a food shoot. White paint looks creamier than milk, there's little that can't be improved with glycerine and a water spray, and they're not above varnishing a chicken. One of the hardest things to reproduce, though, is the steam that tells us food is hot. Even in the slickest shots, it's usually absent, and in the back of our minds something tells us that plate of dinner doesn't look quite as appetising as it should.

The great thing about digital photo manipulation is that you can add on later whatever you couldn't shoot. It's easy to create steam in Photoshop Elements as long as you accept that it'll never look completely realistic. Instead, aim for a sort of naturalistic version of a cartoon steam swirl. Our method relies on two features of Photoshop Elements: Clouds and Shear. You'll find a ready-made cloud image on the cover CD. We created the image using Photoshop Elements. It's a seamless tile, so if you need a larger image you can repeat it across or down. If there's no Shear command in your program, try a warp or wave distortion.

You'll find that if you create this effect in white on a dark background, it can serve as either steam or smoke, but if you do it in black on a light background it'll always look like something's on fire. Bear this in mind when planning which photos to use it on.

1 Run any recent version of Photoshop Elements and proceed through the Welcome screen to the main editing

window. In version 5, you click on the option to Edit and Enhance Photos. Choose New, Blank File from the File menu, or press Ctrl+N. In the dialog box that appears, choose a size and shape of image appropriate to where you plan to apply your steam effect, or pick a reasonable size for a generic effect that you can use later. We set ours at 4x4 inches at 300dpi, giving 1,200x1,200 pixels. Make sure the Color Mode is RGB.

2 Press D to set the foreground and background colours to black and white, then go to the Filter menu and choose Render, Clouds. The canvas fills with randomly generated black-and-white cloud patterns.

3 Press L for the Lasso tool. Then press L again to switch to Polygonal Lasso mode. You can do the same thing by clicking on the last of the three icons at the left of the Tool Options bar at the top. Then click halfway across the canvas, about a quarter of the way down from the top. Release the mouse button and move downwards; a straight line follows your pointer. Click at the bottom of the canvas, about a quarter of the way in from the left, then again three-quarters of the way to the right. Finally, click back on the top point, making a triangle. It needn't be exactly symmetrical.

4 Go to Select, Feather and enter a large Radius; we used 80 pixels. Click OK, then press Shift+Ctrl+I to invert the selection, selecting everything outside the triangle. Press the Delete key to erase this area, leaving a pyramid of smoke. Cancel the selection by

pressing Ctrl+D. Now, if you want to create white steam (or smoke) rather than black, just turn the whole image into a negative by pressing Ctrl+I.

5 Go to Filter, Distort, Shear. In the dialog box that appears, set Undefined Areas to Repeat Edge Pixels. Click on the vertical line at the top to add points, then drag them to the left or right to make the line wiggle. The effect is previewed below. You'll want wide, wandering wiggles for cigarette smoke, for example. Here, we're creating gentler swirls for a cup of hot coffee. Make sure the swirls don't go off the edge of the canvas, unless you want them to go off the edge of your photo.

6 To apply the effect, open a photo in another window (Ctrl+O). Press V for the Move tool and drag the steam image on to the photo, where it becomes Layer 1. In the Layers palette on the right, change this layer's blending mode from Normal to Screen. If you were creating black smoke, you'd use Multiply mode instead. For grey smoke, try creating the effect in white and choosing the Exclusion blending mode.

Using the handles on the layer's bounding box, adjust its size and position to fit whatever the steam is supposed to be coming from – in this case, the coffee cup. It's OK to stretch the swirl horizontally or vertically, and you can also flip it around if necessary by dragging one of the side handles all the way over the opposite side, as we've done here. Finally, reduce the layer's opacity to make the effect more subtle; you can do this while still adjusting the bounding box so that you can judge the final result. To confirm the size and position, press Return. **CS**

EXPERT TIP

For a more intricate steam swirl, add several steam images, each one in a layer set to Screen or Multiply mode

